

Research Writing in a Foreign Language

By JoEllen M. Simpson

It is generally agreed that learning to write well is a difficult and time-consuming process (Atkinson and Ramanathan 1995; Kaplan 1987; Richards 1990; Taylor 1980; Wallace-Robinett 1978; etc.). In order to write well, an individual needs more than basic mechanical control, especially the nonnative student who may feel anxiety and frustration about starting, creating, or finishing a writing assignment or project, even though he or she has sufficient mechanical ability in the foreign language (Richards 1990:100). Writers need to have enough language and general intellectual skills to generate and organize ideas and put those ideas into coherent, logically ordered, intelligible sentences, paragraphs, and essays.

This is a report of the application of a North American system of research writing (based on several texts such as Hacker 1988; Hacker and Ranch 1989; Spack 1990) in a high-intermediate class of EFL learners in Colombia. The students had little prior experience with academic writing based on research in their native language, Spanish, and even less experience with academic writing in the two foreign languages they studied in their department of modern languages, English and French. The system presented to them was taken from a variety of sources representing typical approaches to the introduction of academic research writing at the university level in the United States.

For most of the authors cited, the first step is to become familiar with the library, its resources, and its methods for locating resources. After becoming familiar with the availability of materials, the student needs to choose a topic of interest and pose several questions that could be answered through reading various sources (books, journals, magazines, newspapers). A student also has to know how to find and to read articles and books and take notes from those sources, indicating direct quotations, paraphrases, and summaries of the author's words.

After collecting sufficient material to start writing the research paper, the student needs to identify the audience; select the tone, organization, and documentation; and limit and focus the topic, none of which is an easy task. Then the student needs to solidify his or her argument, organize the information in a logical order, and write a rough draft of the research paper. The cited authors also suggest that some time be dedicated to revision in order to polish the organization and presentation of ideas before submitting the paper to the teacher for review.

Potential Problems for Nonnative Speakers

Because of the complexity of research writing, there are a number of challenges that face nonnative speakers when attempting to acquire this skill. A specific problem for them in this process may be in reading and taking notes from materials written by native speakers of the target language. The student who is learning to write may have the tendency to copy word for word. Wallace-Robinett explains that because they do not have the syntactic and semantic skills

of native speakers (or the confidence in the skills that they do have), nonnative speakers may "prefer to copy the words of another, which seem so much more accurate and elegant than their own" (1978:197). This is not usually done out of malice but more likely insecurity about writing and reporting the ideas of others.

Another problem may be exposure to research writing. Egginton (1987), Jones (1990), and Wallace-Robinett (1978) point out that many nonnative speakers of English, who come from a variety of different cultures, have very little or even no training in specific styles of writing, especially research writing. A possible explanation may be that the number of resources (books, journals, journal indices) is extremely limited (which is the case in many universities in Colombia). This shortage limits students and even professors in their attempts to do the research that is needed for much academic writing.

An Introduction to Research Writing

Difficulties and successes in learning to use new writing skills and techniques in the foreign language are the main focus of this report. It is noted here that there may be problems with the concept of writing and literacy across languages. Bell (1995) reports that in her attempt to become literate in Chinese, her native English literary skills did little but hinder her.

In an experiment, a group of native Spanish speaking students studying English in an EFL situation were exposed to the research writing process and required to write a research paper for their English class. The participants were 12 members of a Level VI (high-intermediate) English class in the modern languages department of a large public university in Colombia. Their English class met six hours per week, divided into two-hour classes on three separate days. The course ran for approximately four months, and the time dedicated to the research process was just less than half of the semester. The students were considered to be high-intermediate in their language skills, fully capable of carrying on discussions about many topics and writing in complete sentences with reasonably accurate grammatical control. Although the students were ideally at the same level of development, some students were above average and others were below average in their overall skills. Regarding their knowledge of academic writing in general, none of the students had previously written a research paper in English (or French), and very few of them had a similar experience in Spanish, their native language. They were, however, interested in the project and motivated to learn how to do this type of advanced writing.

10 Steps to a Research Paper

To organize the presentation of the research project for the students, a series of 10 steps for research writing were developed. Following these steps as a guideline, the introduction to research writing was implemented in the class.

The *first step* was an introduction to the research process in general, with an overview of what the final product would look like. This step included a specific time line of dates for the completion of each successive step, ending with the due date for the final version. To encourage

students to be systematic in the collection of material for their written reports, it was suggested that they keep a research journal. For the purposes of the project, this journal was to have three sections:

1. topic, research questions, working thesis
2. bibliography and notes from readings
3. interactive response (a section where the student was to write his/her reactions to each article or book that was read, or in other words, an evaluation of the reading)

The *second step* was to select a topic. Students used brainstorming, clustering, and questioning to find an interesting topic. After the topic was chosen, students were given an assignment about narrowing the focus (see Appendix A below). Before completing the assignment, the class went on a tour of the library (the *third step*) to review what was available and how the materials were organized and accessed. Included in the library tour was an introduction to using a journal index. Also involved in this step was a discussion of research strategies (for example, going from general to specific) as well as a review of the different types of resources available (books, journals, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, etc.).

An initial material collection to explore the availability of sources of the chosen topics made up the *fourth step* . This was not an in-depth review of the literature but a quick search to see if sources existed and were available at the university (the reason for this step was, and remains, the shortage of materials available in the university library as was stated earlier). After this early material was collected about the topics, *the fifth step* was to write some preliminary questions, hypotheses, or objectives for the research paper.

These first five steps were accomplished in approximately two weeks, giving the students several weeks (three to four) to read more sources and take notes about the topic. During this *sixth step* , methods for taking notes were reviewed. These included understanding direct quotation and its requirements (word-for- word transcriptions, quotation marks, page numbers, full bibliographical information), summaries and paraphrases and their requirements (student's own words, full bibliographical information), and an introduction to bibliographies or reference lists.

The *seventh step* was to review outlining and argumentation. An introduction to argumentation was presented when the students were ready to begin writing a rough draft. The aim was to show them a new rhetorical style. They needed to recognize differences between statements of fact and arguments of opinion as well as the differences between personal opinions and the opinions of other authors. This knowledge was intended to help the students avoid the trap of writing another author's argument as their own. Part of this step was the introduction of audience awareness, to be aware of who was going to read the final product, in order to have an appropriate tone.

After they had collected sufficient information, the rough drafts (the *eighth step*) were written. The students were given a ready-made outline to help them organize their thoughts. It was not expected, however, that they follow the outline if they felt that it did not suit their needs. The generic outline was presented as follows:

After the rough draft was written, the group reviewed citation and reference conventions (the *ninth step*), followed by revising techniques so that the students would not write one draft and hand it in as the final one. The last task (the *tenth step*) was to write the final draft, which was completed according to the agreed-upon time line.

In review, the ten steps were:

1. Introducing the research paper (time line, due date, and research journal);
2. Selecting a topic, narrowing it;
3. Visiting the library and reviewing research strategies and available resources;
4. Exploring the availability of sources;
5. Writing preliminary research questions, hypotheses, or objectives;
6. Doing research: taking notes, summarizing, and paraphrasing;
7. Writing arguments and creating an outline;
8. Writing a rough draft;
9. Writing a resource list and properly citing applicable material;
10. Revising the rough draft and writing the final draft.

Comments About the 10-step Process in Practice

All of the students in the class completed the research paper. Through their attempts, it became evident that some changes needed to be made in the 10-step model. Initially, many of the students thought that the research journal would be a very helpful tool for organizing their work. Unfortunately, this was one of the weakest parts of the entire process. Most did not try to keep their notes in a research journal but preferred to make photocopies of everything and to highlight relevant information. This lack of consistency in their notes caused confusion and difficulties in locating information when they needed to write the rough drafts. Their "note-taking strategy" may have been the result of a low level of confidence in their English, which may not have allowed them to feel good about writing paraphrases and summaries of material originally written in English by native speakers.

This problem demonstrates the need to expand this part of the training to include much more classroom practice about note taking: how to take down direct quotations and how to manage paraphrases and summaries of information using the students' own words and structures. A suggested change is to make the research journal (with handwritten notes about all of the sources) a required part of the grade of the research paper, with periodical evaluations of the work in the journal.

Another problem came in writing arguments. In working with argumentation, some students were at a loss. They understood the concept of argument, but they had difficulties in developing their own argument (or opinion) apart from those reported by the experts that they were reading. In order to help solve this problem, argumentation could be presented much earlier in the research process in order to give students more time and practice managing it.

Another area of trouble for the students was in writing citations and references. After repeated explanations, classroom activities, and reviews of rough drafts in progress, most of the students were unable to manage quotation, paraphrasing, summary, and attribution to the original authors. Similarly, writing the reference list was a struggle for many, from finding the appropriate information in the books and journals they read to placing that information in the appropriate order to meet the needs of the style sheet they were using. The suggested solution lies in better use of the research journal and in added emphasis on the note-taking procedures, such as the need for quotation marks around direct quotations, exact page numbers, and clear signals of original authorship for summaries and paraphrases. Extensive practice is needed for students to master these skills.

Conclusion

There were two areas of expected problems: the practice of copying from the originals in English (Wallace-Robinett 1978) and the students' limited experience interfering with the writing process (as reported by Eggington 1987; Jones 1990; and Wallace-Robinett 1978). Regarding the first problem, there was some limited use of copying in the final drafts of the research papers by some of the students with weaker general writing skills. This pattern seemed to reflect the confidence students had in their own language. The second problem, that of a lack of experience, in my opinion, caused the other problems and difficulties reported in the previous section. The majority of the weaknesses were minor considering the overall effort the students made to write their first research paper. With increased experience in both English and Spanish, these students will take control of their academic writing.

Although there were some difficulties in its first application in this environment, the 10-step research writing process in this particular high-intermediate EFL class was successful. In the time since the class has ended, the majority of the students have thanked me for introducing them to this new skill. As they start choosing topics and doing research for their senior theses, the students are beginning to realize the value of a systematic program for completing a research project.

From the first experience with this 10-step model, it was possible to make changes that have made it more applicable to this specific audience in Colombia. As each semester passes, the system will be reintroduced to a new group of students and more changes will be made. It is suggested that with adaptations to meet the specific needs of any audience, this system could become a helpful tool in a non-North American environment.

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Appendix A

Narrowing Your Research Topic

On another sheet of paper, do the following exercises:

1. Write down the general topic you wish to pursue.
2. List one appropriate journal index for this topic.
3. List two articles found in this index (include author's name, year of publication, title of article, volume and number of journal, and page numbers of article).
4. Read and briefly summarize one of these articles.
5. List one question within the topic that you have found in reading this article.
6. List any topic vocabulary you discovered in reading this article.